



**BETWEEN PERPETRATION
AND PREVENTION
OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM
ACCOUNTING FOR GENDER**

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United Nations Development Programme Iraq
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This study was written by Ouafae Sandi, an international consultant at UNDP Iraq.

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FOREWORD

Women's participation is essential to peace. While often seen as victims of violent extremism, women's roles are multifaceted, including being on the frontlines of prevention, as well as perpetrating or leading violent and terrorist acts themselves.

As such, inclusion of women and ensuring gender sensitive approaches in efforts and programmes for Preventing/countering violent extremism is critical and needs to be addressed in strategic interventions, expedited, and take many forms at different levels.

While this study highlights and analyzes the drivers and roles of women taking part in violent extremism and supporting violent and extremist groups, whether by force or voluntarily, it also emphasizes the very important contribution that women can play in prevention within the family and society. A comprehensive understanding of the roles and responsibilities of women in preventing violent extremism contributes to defining women's participation and leadership in prevention, an imperative for sustainable peace and development.

The United Nations Development Programme in Iraq is pleased to make this study and its recommendations available to national and international partners and to all interested experts and researchers working in the field of preventing violent extremism to contribute to enriching the discussion and strengthening programmes to prevent violent extremism in the Arab region.



Zena Ali-Ahmad

UNDP Iraq Resident Representative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women and men have many of the same social, economic and political frustrations that can drive extremism. The common assumption that women will not use violence to express their beliefs is incorrect.¹ Violent extremism among women can be linked with socialization as well as gender-based violence and discrimination. Although gender equality principles are now rooted in international human rights laws, global development goals and national action plans, traditional authorities resist change, increasing women's grievances and creating favourable conditions for radicalization and violent extremism.

While some girls and women are pressured, coerced and abducted by violent extremist groups (VEGs), many choose to join them. Either way, women often play complex roles as victims or perpetrators of violent extremism and/or preventers of it.² In recent years, VEGs have paid more attention to recruiting women whether by force or voluntarily. They consider women essential to their organizational structure and the success of their operations, and a means for propaganda for the culture of violence and hatred they aim to impose on the entire world.

At first, women's position in VEGs was limited to the private sphere and traditional roles as wives, mothers, teachers and nurses. In recent years, these roles have expanded greatly. Women have started to play important parts in logistics in electronic recruitment campaigns, funding and operational support. Terrorist attacks committed by Boko Haram's female members resulted in 1,200 victims from 2014-2018.³

With the outbreak of COVID-19, many concerns arose that the pandemic would aggravate extremism and violence within communities due to its economic ramifications. These include unemployment and growing poverty rates, which are key drivers of violent extremism. Intelligence reports and research now show that VEGs are exploiting the world's fear, confusion and preoccupation with the pandemic and its repercussions to spread a discourse of extremism and hate among new audiences, including women and girls.

Due to increasing violent extremism among women, spurred by the interest of VEGs in supporting their female members, and COVID-19's economic and social ramifications, there is an urgent need for prevention focused on women and the motives leading them to violent extremism. Women should be engaged in all programmes and policies for prevention, across the stages of development, implementation and evaluation. This will yield better and more sustainable results, support social stability and contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Since all social structures, practices and behaviours have gender dimensions,⁴ women can make unique and valuable contributions to programmes to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE). Member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and its Women Development Organization encourage larger and more systematic engagement in empowering and involving women in such programmes on the regional and local levels.

Since women's empowerment improves their lives and society as a whole, promoting peace, security and social cohesion, women should play a central role in designing P/CVE programmes. Among other factors, women can be an important source of information about a given society⁵ and thus active in fortifying it against extreme currents. Many women are keen to play roles in P/CVE programmes, given a strong interest in preventing extremism's negative impacts on women and society, and in preventing their children from becoming extremists. Some women may be more attuned to early signs of extremism among their children, including anger, anxiety and seclusion. The mothers of young extremists are strategically positioned to help their children face challenges and avoid extremism.

The role of women should not be limited to the private sphere; they should realize their full potential to enter public spaces, contribute to discussions and shape views on curbing violent extremism. ⁶Female religious guides and preachers in fact usually contribute to spreading moderate Islam among women and often act as the first communication point for women dealing with male extremist relatives.

Civil society and women's organizations also help cut the roots of extremism by combating violence against women, improving access to education, creating entrepreneurship opportunities and encouraging women's participation in the political process. Such organizations can act as mediators between local communities and security authorities

and play a role in prevention in local communities as they may be closer to them and have more understanding of their circumstances and the problems of youth. They can work with women to help build self-confidence and skills to prevent extremism in their families and local communities.

Women working in law enforcement, given their powers of observation and understanding of the people they serve, can contribute effectively to inquiries involving female members of extremist groups. Female members of security forces also contribute to preventing suicide bombings carried out by women as they are in some cases better equipped to detect the many methods women use to hide explosives.

Across entire societies, women teachers, educators, media professionals, doctors, judges, investigators and so on can be involved in preventing violent extremism. They may be better placed to prevent other women from embracing radical ideologies, and to work with women in P/CVE and in rehabilitation and integration programmes. They can also spread moderate thinking in their communities and model productive and constructive behaviour.

Despite women's abilities and multiple roles in P/CVE, they are generally not supported in P/CVE strategies. National, regional and international stakeholders pay little attention to involving women in P/CVE programmes, wasting resources and opportunities for effective efforts that also uphold women's rights.

Relevant authorities often consider men

and boys as most targeted by VEGs and make them the main targets of P/CVE efforts. They view women and girls who join VEGs or adopt extremist thinking as mere exceptions, generally deemed 'victims' or 'mothers' of violent extremists. If policymakers do not factor in the gender dimensions of violent extremism, do not invest in women or draw on their positions in families and society, and do not involve them in P/CVE programmes, strategies can fail or, worse, have adverse results.

This study aims to present the best existing practices and recommendations on P/CVE. While it considers ways that women facilitate violent extremism, support VEGs whether by force or voluntarily and commit acts that can be labeled 'terrorism', it emphasizes that women can play key roles in prevention. The war against violent extremism requires a comprehensive societal approach in which women's participation is essential.



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INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism is not limited to a certain nationality, race, religion, ideology or sex. The causes of extremism need to be understood, and psychological and socialization factors as well as historical, political, economic and cultural contexts considered. People get involved in extremism by following different paths and under different circumstances. Violent extremism occurs across social, political, national, cultural and geographical borders, and involves diverse ages and genders.

In recent decades, VEGs have targeted women for recruitment. The possibility of women joining VEGs emerged in the 1980s, but initially women were mainly deemed to be 'victims' or 'subordinate' to men. A global wave of women's extremism and attacks carried out by women, especially with the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), along with intelligence on VEGs making increasing efforts to recruit women should encourage all actors to take the danger of women's extremism seriously.

While VEG female members are often portrayed as forced victims or perpetrators of violent acts, in reality, women play roles in violent extremism that exceed this simplistic binary view.⁷ In recent years, research has shone a spotlight on the different experiences of women and girls involved in and affected by violent extremism. This has revealed obvious differences between the current wave of women's violent extremism and the previous ones. The current wave is more complicated, global and diverse in terms of age, sex and experience in conflict zones.⁸

Women's involvement in violent extremism can take complex forms. They may be recruiters on the Internet and social media, teachers, doctors, media campaigners, financiers, logistics officers, supporters and sponsors or perform a mixture of several roles. Many women inside extremist groups still perform traditional roles, such as taking care of male fighters and bearing and raising children according to extremist ideologies. In some cases, women and girls are abducted and forced to join VEGs. In other cases, they accompany their husbands, parents and children, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Some join groups voluntarily for reasons that are not much different from those of men, such as a sense of injustice and inequality within their communities.

Gender inequality increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, aggravating impacts on women and hindering efforts to tackle the economic and social ramifications. Many women globally work in the informal economy where there is insufficient or no health insurance, and income is not secured given a lack of social protection. A constrained ability to make a living and meet the basic needs of their families leaves some women more vulnerable to risks of violent extremism as extremist groups exploit difficult circumstances and times of uncertainty to attract and recruit new members, including young men and women and girls.

Women may also have special capabilities in P/CVE inside families and local communities. For example, they might be the first to sound the alarm when there is growing violent

extremism in their community. They mobilize through civil society and women's organizations and actively participate in P/CVE efforts. Many women have essential knowledge, competencies and long-term dedication to P/CVE, including in identifying when prevention policies and practices can have negative impacts on communities. Their participation is essential as policymakers, religious guides and preachers, workers in law enforcement, teachers, members of society and human rights activists.

Understanding different contexts, tackling the root causes leading young men and women and girls to join VEGs, and proactive prevention are the basis for eliminating violent extremism. In line with UN Security Council resolution 2242 (2015) and the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, taking violent extremism's gender dimensions into account, involving women in P/CVE strategies, and enabling them to develop, implement and evaluate programmes can achieve higher-quality and more sustainable responses.

P/CVE efforts are no longer the responsibility of certain entities only. The effectiveness of such efforts requires a practical, participatory and comprehensive approach that involves all actors, including women and girls. Integrating gender into P/CVE focuses on three main points: women and girls as victims of violent extremism; women as perpetrators, facilitators and supporters of it; and women who prevent and counter it.

Purpose and methodology

This study provides a point of reference for policymakers and experts, civil society organizations (CSOs), women's organizations and other stakeholders on women and violent extremism. It warns about the dangers of women's extremism and discusses why women adopt extremist discourses and violence. It highlights how the lives of women and girls changed during COVID-19, which may contribute to increasing extremism inside societies.

The study explains how women can be encouraged to avoid extremism, and presents available policy options and priority measures to mainstream gender in tackling violent extremism. It recommends that all P/CVE programmes, plans, strategies, measures and their budgets take gender dimensions into account. This implies empowering women economically, socially and politically to discourage involvement in violent extremism, involving women and women's organizations in designing P/CVE programmes and strategies, and integrating lessons from mainstreaming gender in P/CVE programmes.

The study is aligned with the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, UN Security Council resolution 2242 and other UN recommendations that call for due diligence and practical plans to tackle violent extremism.

Study structure

The study presents a gender analysis of violent extremism, its causes and why women embrace it and join VEGs. It highlights why these groups are keen on attracting and recruiting female members and how women can become key actors in P/CVE efforts. After a brief explanation of terms and concepts, the first part of the study covers the reasons leading women to adopt extremist ideologies and the roles they play within VEGs, with attention to higher risks in the time of COVID-19. It also discusses how to discourage women from getting involved in extremism.

The second part of the study clarifies the international policies and directions on women's involvement in P/CVE strategies and the different roles played by women in P/CVE. It touches on women's roles as mothers and female religious guides and preachers, in women's organizations and as female workers in law enforcement in relation to P/CVE. It also looks at women's capacities to tackle extremism on the Internet, and in education, culture and media. The study concludes with lessons from integrating gender in P/CVE programmes.



Livelihoods training held as part of UNDP Iraq's Community-based Reconciliation and Reintegration in Iraq Project, 2022.

DEFINITIONS

The following definitions explain key terms used in this study. They are for this study only and are not official UNDP definitions, nor do they reflect the views of funders of this guide.

Terminology related to terrorism and violent extremism is complex and still highly controversial, for several reasons. Terms often lack internationally agreed definitions. As noted in the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, the definitions of 'terrorism' and 'violent extremism' are not explicit. These terms should be defined by UN Member States even if definitions must comply with their commitments to international law, especially on human rights.

Counter-narrative: This starts from extremist content and corrects it by highlighting mistakes, fabrications and false allegations in the political, social and religious fields. Many governments and local and international institutions implement such initiatives, including the Rabita Mohammedia des Oulémas (Muhammad's Association of Religious Scholars) and an initiative run by Al-Azhar Mosque called 'They Claim and We Correct'.

Drivers of violent extremism: The factors that can lead to the rise of extremism. They motivate groups or individuals to support or get involved in violent extremism ("push factors") and influence extremism and recruitment ("pull factors").

Empowerment: One definition of empowerment is that it is "a multi-dimensional social process which provides individuals with mechanisms to control their own lives. It gives

individuals the required power to use it in their own lives and their communities by acting on issues that they define as important."⁹ Women's empowerment means their "ability to make strategic life choices after they have been previously denied this ability."¹⁰ Empowerment is essential to preserve gains that women have achieved on the individual, family, societal and wider levels. It includes advancing the status of women through eradication of illiteracy, education, training and raising awareness.¹¹ Women's empowerment also means enabling them to make decisions on all issues affecting them and their societies, at all levels.¹²

Extremism: While there is no internationally agreed definition, this term is often used to mean progressing towards violent extremism and terrorism. It refers to those embracing different ideas about existing social customs and seeking to change societies according to their own ideologies.

Foreign terrorist fighters: The UN Security Council defines them as "individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict."¹³ Although this definition includes women fighting on the frontlines, it excludes women who play other key supporting roles in VEGs.

Gender: The World Health Organization defines gender as "the socially constructed roles, behavior, activities and attributes that a particular society considers appropriate for men and

women.” A UNDP document refers to gender as “the social attributes and participation in social activities as a member of a certain group.” Since these attributes and behaviours are learned, they change over time and vary from one culture to another. Gender is different from the concept of sex, which is defined by biology.

Gender mainstreaming: This involves integrating gender issues and needs in all development programmes, projects and plans. It requires actively involving women in development activities through participation and leadership, and by responding to the potentially different needs of women and men, and girls and boys.

Gender relations: These are the ways in which a culture or society defines the rights, responsibilities and identities of men and women in relation to one another. Gender is often misunderstood and limited to women’s issues. In fact, it covers relationships between men and women, their roles, their access to and control over resources, the division of work and other issues, and inequality between men and women.¹⁴

International gender commitments: The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action embodies international commitment to achieve the goals of equality, development and peace for all women. This platform comprises 12 areas for advancing women and gender equality: poverty, education and training, health, violence, armed conflict, the economy, decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, means of communication, environment and childhood. The Beijing Platform for Action translates women’s rights demands into strategic goals for governments, the international community, non-governmental organizations and the private sector.

Leniency in tackling violent extremism: This is the ‘soft power’ strategy adopted by some countries in P/CVE. It depends on unconventional and non-violent measures that aim to counter extremist ideologies through intellectual engagement, the arts, culture and media. This strategy is part of a comprehensive P/CVE vision that considers the intellectual and cultural dimensions that feed extremism, and deploys comprehensive and integrated measures to counter it. The approach is based on achieving ‘intellectual security’ to counter intellectual extremism in addition to security solutions to stop uprisings of violent extremism.

Local community: The local community usually refers to people and institutions in the same area and/or with common interests. This term is complicated and highly controversial. It can have many interpretations that cover several different and overlapping concepts. Shared interest communities bring together individuals, groups and organizations with one or more common interests (for example, the same geographic area, protection of a specific culture, or a sport or other recreational activity). Geographical communities are composed of individuals, groups and institutions in the same space, such as neighbourhoods and districts, and can include the entire population of a country. Communities might share international or multi-country interests that extend beyond national borders. With advanced means of communication, people, individuals and institutions separated by long distances can meet and interact on issues of common interest.

Preventing / countering violent extremism: These two terms describe ways to tackle violent extremism. They are often used interchangeably. Prevention means stopping the

development of problems, however, and requires tackling the conditions and causes that lead to violent extremism. Countering includes the programmes, strategies and measures that dismantle violent narratives and promote healthy alternatives. This can include the rehabilitation and integration of former violent extremists. Prevention and countering programmes are proactive measures to thwart VEGs' attempts to attract new members, change their perspectives, and tackle specific factors that facilitate and enable recruitment.

Push factors: Conditions or grievances that create frustration, marginalization and disempowerment, and encourage people to seek remedies including, but not limited to, joining extremist groups.¹⁵

Recruitment: The process where an individual shifts from "grievance/mobilization to partaking or supporting in a violent act. Recruitment requires at some level (even a very basic level) a personal connection to a violent extremist, even if that recruitment is done online."¹⁶

Terrorism: There is no internationally agreed definition of terrorism. The United Nations has indicated on many occasions that adopting a common definition of terrorism would facilitate preventing and countering this phenomenon. According to a definition adopted by the Security Council in 2004, based on

UN instruments and international law, terrorism is "criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious."

Violent extremism: There is also no internationally agreed definition of violent extremism.¹⁷ "The UN Secretary-General noted that violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon which is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief."¹⁸ The most common definition of the term refers to the beliefs and actions of individuals who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals.¹⁹

Violent extremist groups: Groups of individuals who support or practise violence associated with an ideology to achieve political goals.²⁰ These include terrorist organizations driven by ideologies and local violent extremists.²¹



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PART I:

WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Over the last few years, the world has witnessed major threats from violent extremism, undermining people's rights, security and stability. The impact of violent extremism on women as victims or perpetrators has not been fully elaborated, however. With a past emphasis on women as 'victims' or 'subordinate' in VEGs,²² some studies have begun to probe the complex factors that lead women to adopt extremism and sometimes to support VEGs. These are illuminating how women are moving beyond limited and conventional roles.

According to the Global Extremism Monitor for 2017, women carried out about 181 terrorist attacks or 11 percent of the total that year. About 26 percent of those arrested in Europe for carrying out terrorist attacks in 2016 were women. Women have also accounted for a large percentage of foreign terrorist fighters joining ISIS. Some studies estimate that women now account for 10-15 percent of the members of VEGs.²³ According to a 2018 study, women represented 30 percent of foreign terrorist fighters in ISIS.²⁴ Some reports indicate that ISIS has about 4,761 female members.²⁵ Participation shares vary by region: 35 percent of foreign women fighters came from East Asia; 23 percent from Eastern Europe; 17 percent from Western Europe; 17 percent from North and South America, Australia and New Zealand; 12 percent from Central Asia; 6 percent from the Middle East and North Africa; and less than 1 percent from sub-Saharan Africa.

After the defeat of ISIS in 2017 in Iraq and Syria, the number of foreign terrorist fighters returning to their countries or a third country increased. The International Center for the Study of Radicalization registered 7,366 ISIS members going back to their countries of origin in 2018. Globally, only 4 percent (256) of total returnees were women.

Although these figures are estimates, they refute the conception that violent extremism is limited to men and that women are mainly victims. Women join VEGs voluntarily and are involved in planning and carrying out attacks across the world. Intelligence about efforts to recruit women and the operations they carry out are warnings that women's violent extremism should be taken seriously.

There is a need to understand why women and girls join VEGs and their new, diverse and complex roles in these groups.²⁶ Insights on the gender dimensions of violent extremism can contribute to measures to mitigate women's involvement and prevent violent extremism within and across societies.

Roles of women and girls in VEGs²⁷



Perpetrators: Women and girls who commit violent acts in the name of VEGs. Such acts are on the rise. For example, a large number of Boko Haram's suicide bombers are women.



Supporters: Women and girls who voluntarily join VEGs in supporting roles as recruiters, financiers, logistical workers, wives and mothers.



Families: Women and girls related to VEG members who accompany their relatives to conflict zones willingly or unwillingly as well as their children who are born there.



Abductees: Women and girls forced to join VEGs through abduction and manipulation. Well-known cases include the group of abducted Nigerian girls, the enslaved Yazidi girls and the Kenyan girls who were promised jobs but instead found themselves members of the Al-Shabab Movement in Somalia.



Various age groups and family situations

Potential factors that can lead women and girls to join extremism

Push and pull factors	
Push factors	Pull factors
Subordination to men and the wish to marry strong fighters	Personal reasons including the existential and spiritual search for identity and purpose, a utopian ²⁸ vision of the world, a sense of mission and heroism, the promise of adventure and power, attraction to violence, etc.
Ideological convictions (embracing radical interpretations of religion)	Responding to collective injustices and grievance statements, which incite emotional reactions directed by charismatic leaders



continue

Push and pull factors	
Push factors	Pull factors
Seeking empowerment	Abusing religious texts and beliefs
Psychological and social factors such as imbalances from complicated childhoods	Attraction to charismatic leaders who provide power and money, and a sense of belonging to a strong group, etc. ²⁹
Lack of or poor quality education, which makes women less able to withstand extremist ideas and recruitment and mobilization efforts	Filling the vacuum experienced by some women with no goals and feelings of worthlessness, injustice or marginalization.
Achieving personal goals and feelings of excellence, adventure, respect, identity and belonging	The illusion of empowerment and 'distinguished elite' propaganda
Exclusion, discrimination and marginalization based on gender and inequality within their own countries or between their own and other countries	Finding alternative forms of recognition that help them realize self-respect, dignity and social justice
Feelings of loneliness and isolation	Jihad, martyrdom and going to heaven
Influence of relatives and friends	Taking part in an attractive media discourse and using modern tools
Feelings of injustice or authoritarianism of the State or foreign countries	Promises of wealth, stable living standards, romantic life, and opportunities to support building the state of ISIS as mothers, wives, teachers, nurses, employees, media publicists or fighters ³⁰
Poverty, social fragility, lack of opportunities and loss of hope in the future	
Taking revenge for the death or detention of a member of a family or society	
Misogyny and violence against women push people, including women, to support violent extremism	

Women, men and young people have varying motives to join VEGs.³¹ ISIS shocked the world with its ability to mobilize thousands of young men and women from different nationalities and ages. The success of its unprecedented recruitment resulted from many factors. First, unlike other VEGs, ISIS realized the need for female members and supporters and tried hard to recruit them. It also pursued different tactics to attract women.³²

The primary method ISIS used to mobilize women entailed exploiting the issues facing them in their countries of origin. It highlighted the ordeal of Syrians suffering from the war raging in their country and played the grievance card. It portrayed women's life outside the alleged 'Caliphate' as lacking freedom and security. It described their lives as constrained due to their inability to lead an 'ideal' life as Muslim women who adhere to the group's interpretation of Islam. It stressed that they are politically oppressed, poor and insecure due to threats of sexual violence. Members of the group claimed that all these issues were solved in areas under ISIS control.³³

Many political, economic, psychological and social factors persuade women to join VEGs. Subjective motives vary but at the end all lead to a belief in harmony with other group members and a common understanding of reality.³⁴ Motives may change over time even in the same person. And people rarely become violent extremists overnight. It takes time and a gradual socialization process.³⁵ Since women are often considered the main influencers in families, there are some indications that extremist groups target them to change their thinking as a way to reach their family.³⁶

In some cases, women are forced to join VEGs.³⁷ Those who are subordinate

to their husbands might be required to follow them or other male relatives. Women are also abducted by VEGs, exploited under coercion and used in different roles within these groups. Some fall victim to VEGs at the beginning but later get involved in violent extremism to improve their situation within the groups or after embracing extremist ideologies.

Women also adopt extremism and join VEGs voluntarily. While some girls are motivated by finding love and other types of romance inside these groups, others are moved by the same factors spurring men to join.³⁸ Gender differences in the key motivations for extremism are negligible; both women and men go through the same stages of extremism. Studies in Africa, Europe, West Asia and North Africa have shown similar results on these issues.³⁹ One found that context rather than gender explains the decision to join extreme groups.⁴⁰

Most women who adopt violent extremism or join VEGs have complex, diverse and overlapping motives, with no unified pattern. Each case should be viewed as the outcome of a woman's unique personal path and psychological background, her environment and the social, political and economic conditions she goes through. Overall, the potential factors leading women to embrace violent extremism can be summarized as follows.

Individual psychological factors: The tendency to misinterpret situations, conspiracy theories, feeling victimized and psychological fragility are all reasons leading to women's violent extremism.⁴¹ The identity crises suffered by many women reinforce anxiety, feelings of frustration due to accumulated failures and disappointment, and low self-esteem. These psychological

factors accumulate within girls who are oppressed in their families and environment and unable to find a sense of security. Some women who have suffered traumas in their childhood or adolescence or live far from their families aspire to forget these traumas by severing all ties with their old world and rushing headlong into a new one.⁴²

Ideological dimensions: Some women join VEGs due to their conviction that Islam is endangered or because they want to become effective elements in a new Islamic society. They may believe in a sacred duty, a historical mission or an end-of-the-world prophecy. Certain religious criteria can influence how men and women perceive their roles in their societies and family structures.⁴³

Social factors and economic fragility: These include social discrimination, stigmatization, marginalization (whether real or false), limited social mobility, failure to achieve goals leading to disappointment,⁴⁴ limited education or job opportunities, a difficult socioeconomic situation that causes anxiety, and social turbulence and frustration due to the failure to meet promises and aspirations.⁴⁵

Political factors: These include various grievances women face due to government measures or inaction, including related to human rights violations, corruption and exclusion. These factors are linked to strong feelings of isolation and injustice, underrepresentation in the political leadership, discrimination and marginalization based on gender. Some women may feel that the rights they have fought to gain are just words on paper in a patriarchal society that denies women their rights under the law.

Searching for identity and belonging: This centres on the quest for a

homogeneous society with a feeling of collective identity.⁴⁶ Feelings of estrangement, discrimination and isolation and the emergence of religious identity questions have led some Western and Arab young women to join VEGs as models for an alternative society. A strong sense of belonging comes from an 'emerging state' and the opportunity to practice their religious beliefs freely.

Seeking empowerment: One of the key attractions of VEGs is the chance to challenge the stereotypical image of weak, submissive women who are deprived of their rights. Women may see themselves as strong people who play leading roles, take up arms and carry out killings and brutal death sentences with their own hands. They imitate masculine personalities, and violate local customs and traditions in patriarchal societies that look down on them.

Seeking revenge: When women lose their jihadi husbands, VEGs exploit their outrage and desire for revenge to convince them to join the cause. Grief over the death of their husband or relatives transforms into determination to take up leadership positions in VEGs and carry out suicide bombings.⁴⁷

Group dynamics: These include fascination with charismatic leaders, friendship and kinship relationships that can encourage women to adopt the same thinking or join the same group, socialization, and searching for an alternative society in which women share the same needs and demands.

Sexual discrimination and violence against women: Sexual discrimination and violence against women are closely related to violent extremism. Women's experiences of violence impact their rejection or support of extremist

groups.⁴⁸ In some cases, supporters of violence against women (including men and women) are three times more likely to support violent extremism. In Indonesia, women who support violence against women or overlook men using violence against women are more likely to support violent extremism. Gender-based violence can also lead women to join extremist groups; rape is one of the main drivers for joining them. Women who carry out suicidal attacks usually come from the most socially vulnerable groups, such as widows and rape victims. In some cases, women are raped and sexually abused by the terrorist group members themselves as a recruitment tactic since this stigmatizes women and facilitates exploiting them.⁴⁹

The transition into violent extremism also involves pull factors that stem from the ambitions and needs of women and girls, such as the desire for a sense of belonging, new identity, finding adventure or money, feeling empowered and important, seeking revenge, hopes

for martyrdom and paradise, etc. Each person seeks to meet certain needs and ambitions by joining these groups. Pull factors determine individual positions within groups. Some women have humanitarian goals or just want to help in managing a group. Others are ready or willing to end their lives to serve them.

The VEGs exploit the identity problems of certain groups of women who, for different reasons, do not feel accepted or integrated into their communities, making them search for new forms of recognition. They join a certain group, even if it is extremist, to feel self-respect, dignity and social justice.

VEGs are now using social media to attract and recruit women from all social, cultural and educational environments, employing diverse narratives that meet the psychological needs of each targeted category. For example, ISIS makes its fighters heroes and role models who impress young men and women.⁵⁰

Roles of women and girls in VEGs

Roles of women and girls in VEGs	
Traditional roles	New roles
Serving their jihadi husbands and raising children	Harboring and serving escaping members
Nursing and providing medical care and relief services	Spreading the groups' extremist ideas on the Internet
Giving religion lessons to women	Raising funds for the group
Calling for jihad and killing	Recruitment on social media
	Spying, reconnoitering and collecting intelligence information



Roles of women and girls in VEGs	
Traditional roles	New roles
	Smuggling
	Enforcing moral laws and managing women's prisons and female captives
	Taking up arms and fighting
	Carrying out suicide attacks
	Planning and carrying out individual operations

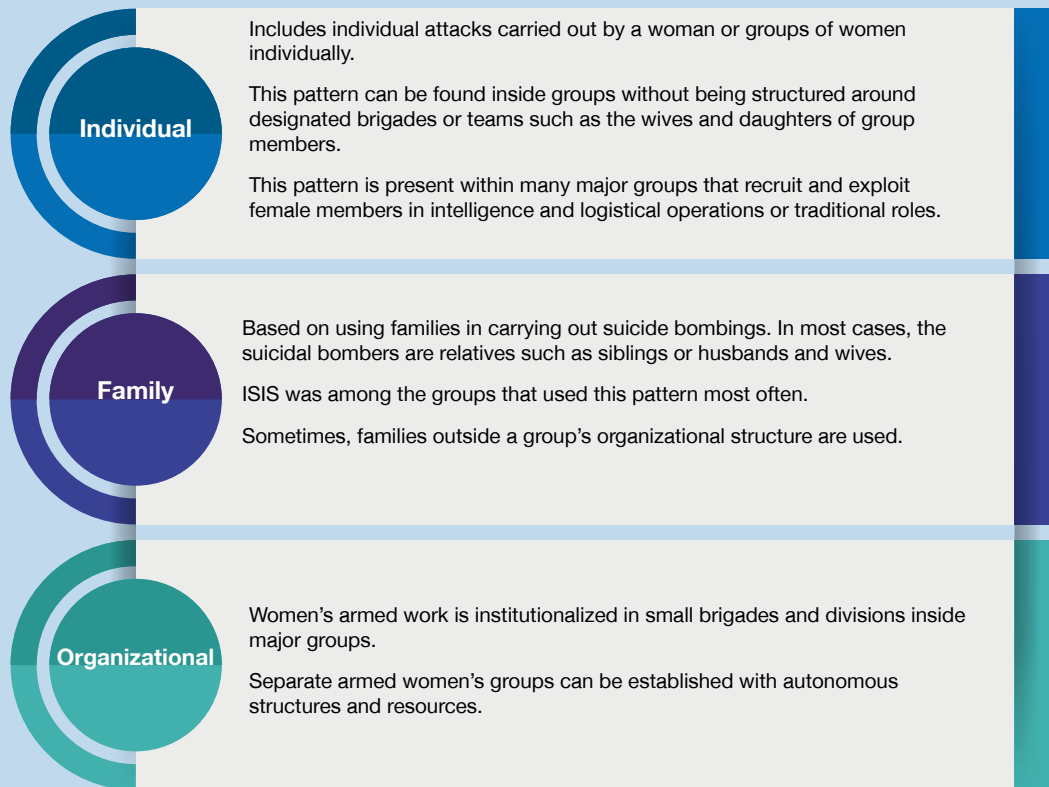
Previously, the role of women in VEGs was limited to marriage, and bearing and raising children based on extremist ideologies and the notion of the Caliphate notion.⁵¹ For example, Al-Qaeda's propaganda centred on Quranic verses that encourage women to support men, raise their children to take part in jihad,⁵² work in nursing and provide medical or relief services to fighters, give religious lessons to other women to give a good image of the group, and call for jihad and fighting but without participation on the battlefield. Over time, as these groups began to need women's support, they attempted, through preachers' fatwas and calls, to recruit women to perform services and logistical roles far from the battlefield.⁵³

From 2000-2005, mobilization surged, urging women to join VEGs in Iraq, Chechnya and the Maghreb. Women were thrust into the cycle of violence

and involved in planning terrorist attacks, especially those no longer convinced of their traditional roles. They started harboring escaping members, spreading extremist ideas on the Internet and raising funds, and eventually moved into fighting and carrying out suicide attacks. The Taliban targeted mothers of soldiers killed in battle, using their tragedies to stress the State's inability and mobilize support for their cause.⁵⁴

The involvement of entire families in the terrorist attacks on churches in Surabaya, Indonesia in May 2018, including a suicide bombing carried out by a woman and her daughters, demonstrated the central role that women can play in attracting family members to violent extremism.

Levels of women's violent extremism⁵⁵



Individual

- Includes individual attacks carried out by a woman or groups of women individually.
- This pattern can be found inside groups without being structured around designated brigades or teams such as the wives and daughters of group members.
- This pattern is present within many major groups that recruit and exploit female members in intelligence and logistical operations or traditional roles.

Family

- Based on using families in carrying out suicide bombings.

In most cases, the suicidal bombers are relatives such as siblings or husbands and wives.

- ISIS was among the groups that used this pattern most often.
- Sometimes, families outside a group's organizational structure are used.

Organizational

- Women's armed work is institutionalized in small brigades and divisions inside major groups.
- Separate armed women's groups can be established with autonomous structures and resources.

Among women who have travelled to foreign countries to join VEGs, some have become active members. Their roles have included giving religious lessons, spreading propaganda, organizing logistics, managing finance, gathering intelligence, reconnoitering and enforcing moral laws. Some are involved in fighting and suicide bombings. In 2017, women carried out 137 suicide attacks in 23 countries compared to 77 in 2016. This significant increase is ascribed to Boko Haram's female members who carried out attacks in West Africa.⁵⁶

Even in adhering to traditional roles within families, women might incite other women to practice violence.⁵⁷ Women also play a major role in electronic recruitment campaigns, operational support and funding for extremist groups. In 2014, authorities from the United States of America arrested a network of 15 women after they transferred thousands of dollars to the Al-Shabaab Movement in Somalia. One study showed that electronic campaigns launched by women to recruit young people for ISIS were better in communication, outreach and effectiveness when compared with ones led by men. Women managed to produce a moving, enthusiastic and emotional discourse that used motivational language that ranged from reproach and reprimand to inducement and intimidation.

Women also work in smuggling. In ISIS, members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade⁵⁸ managed women's prisons and female captives, enforcing sentences against convicted women, working as agents in the local community and writing confidential reports.⁵⁹ With the expansion of women's roles in the group, the brigade started training women to use weapons.

Risks of women's violent extremism during COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated gender inequality and discrimination and the problems many women face all over the world. The pandemic revealed the weaknesses of social, political and economic systems.

With people forced to stay at home while fearing the loss of jobs and livelihoods, domestic violence against women increased. UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched a global call to protect women and girls at home during quarantines. He urged all governments to make prevention and response to violence against women a major part of national plans to address COVID-19.

Although all segments of society have been affected by the pandemic, women have faced specific consequences, including greater economic hardships in some cases and a greater burden from unpaid care work. Women account for 60 percent of informal workers globally, and were particularly hard hit given the lack of social protection programmes and unemployment insurance.⁶⁰

There are mounting fears that COVID-19 will aggravate extremism and violence within communities due to the economic fallout, including unemployment and growing poverty, which are key drivers of violent extremism. Although it is still too early to understand COVID-19's global impact on the spread of extremism, including its gender dimensions, increased time online and use of social media has likely exposed millions of men and women to extremist propaganda, misinformation and conspiracy theories at a moment when people are struggling to understand the

crisis they are living through. There are early signs of an increase in extremism on the Internet, with VEGs exploiting fear, confusion and preoccupation with the pandemic and its repercussions to spread a discourse of extremism and hate speech among new audiences.⁶¹

In 2014, studies of the impact of ISIS propaganda on those willing to travel abroad to join the conflict in Iraq and Syria showed that what attracted new recruits, including women and girls, was the desire to validate their position in the world. New dynamics may now emerge from the pandemic, particularly with previous evidence showing that women adopt extremism due to feelings of injustice and marginalization, and their wish to assert themselves, be empowered and play leading roles within alternative communities.

There have been warnings that VEGs might be exploiting the pandemic by providing financial and moral support to local communities along with religious discourses inciting those who feel angry, anxious and isolated due to the pandemic.⁶² This happened previously

when extremist groups provided basic services and humanitarian aid while incubating their ideological projects. This is far from the stated agenda of these groups to defend the vulnerable.

The COVID-19 pandemic tests policymakers' responses to sudden pandemics and the ability to manage the repercussions for all segments of society, including to prevent and respond to domestic violence, stem job losses and provide social protection. All of these measures, beyond their own merits, are also part of preventing extremist groups from exploiting economic and social fragility for recruitment campaigns. Under such circumstances, governments have to support women and girls in particular to reduce their susceptibility to extremist discourses, including on social media. In general, where women and girls are empowered and realize their rights, they achieve better social and economic outcomes, are more resilient to crisis and are less prone to violent extremism.

Reducing women's openness to violent extremism

Indicators of extremism among women and men⁶³

People who become extremists may be introverted and withdrawn. They refuse to participate in activities, avoid teamwork and remain silent and isolated.

Comments on social media and in their families and social life often indicate intolerance and rejection of others' views and suggest extremism.

They do not accept others, believe that they are always right, especially on religious matters, and feel they are entitled to everything. They might refer to disregard for other nationalities, religions and races.

They are unable to conduct positive research and investigation. They may use unreliable means to adopt ideas or new information. Members of ISIS believed that the group is right simply because it represents Islam. Lacking the capacity to investigate makes such people easy prey for recruitment.

They also lack skills for dialogue and debate, which is clearly evident in those who are intolerant of other opinions and prefer to fight rather than discuss matters logically to convince others.

With limited critical and analytical thinking skills, they often believe in heresies and superstitions even if these cause harm or are illogical. Their behaviour may seem eccentric and confused.

They support extremist groups in public or on social media and attend suspicious meetings with members of well-known groups.

VEGs recruit women for many reasons. These start with using women as a strategic advantage, for instance, in preparing and implementing violent extremist attacks that require a lot of movement and supplies. Women can easily evade monitoring measures as they enjoy semi-societal immunity. They can sneak through military checkpoints and bases, transmit coded messages and exchange information.

Having female members in VEGs is a major factor in publicity and attracting⁶⁴ young fighters. They also garner media attention, especially when female members carry out attacks. They draw

the sympathy of other women who embrace the same ideas or have the same sources of suffering that drive interest in violent extremism. Unlike many men, women can and will play multiple roles, including in education, movement and operations.

When women are radicalized, some are more dangerous and violent than men and believe more strongly in the cause they are defending. Those convinced of extremist ideologies transfer these to their children, shaping a new generation of extremists.

VEGs also exploit women to gain additional resources, as these groups

demand ransoms to release women and girls they detain. According to UN estimates, ISIS collected \$35-45 million dollars in 2013. Boko Haram kidnaps women to achieve many gains, including ransom for releasing them, exchanges for detained group members or opportunities to kill security forces seeking to release kidnapped women and girls.⁶⁵

For all these reasons, P/CVE efforts must tackle women's involvement through identifying and responding to the gender-related reasons that lead women to adopt extremism, and the psychological and social factors that groups exploit to attract women. Specific measures should discourage women from joining or supporting extremist groups remotely and raise their awareness so they do not fall for recruitment tactics.⁶⁶ Analysing women's various roles in radicalization and risks of recruitment should be major elements in designing P/CVE policies and interventions.

The most important means to reduce women's vulnerability to the lure of extremism include increasing and improving women's education and training, raising society's awareness of gender equality, ensuring women's political and social empowerment,

combating violence against them and upholding their rights. Women who realize all of their rights as citizens will likely be less prone to VEG involvement.

Integrating women and girls and mainstreaming gender in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating all P/CVE policies, measures, programmes and practices will improve all these efforts and provide additional resources to enhance the unique and important roles of women and girls in P/CVE.⁶⁷ UN Women has identified four key areas of focus in high-risk areas across Asia and the Pacific:

Empowerment: Promoting women's leadership and economic empowerment to enhance peaceful coexistence, build social cohesion and strengthen society's resilience.

Participation: Increasing women's participation and leadership of P/CVE efforts.

Research: Expanding the evidence base on the gender-related motivations of extreme violence and its impact on women and girls.

Policy impact: Ensuring that national and regional P/CVE frameworks are gender sensitive and guided by women's experiences.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Effective prevention requires a gender analysis of violent extremism and its context. More studies and statistics are needed on women's extremism.

Research should focus on gender analysis of individual factors and local reasons leading women to adopt extremism, and women's recruitment mechanisms and tracks within extremist groups.

The reasons behind women's adoption of extremism should be identified and addressed. Efforts should focus on preventing women from joining or supporting extremist groups remotely and on raising their awareness so they are less susceptible to recruitment tactics.

Identifying and analysing women's various radicalization roles and the factors putting them at risk of recruitment by VEGs should be major elements in designing P/CVE policies and interventions.

It is important to avoid stereotypical patterns, including those that assume that women can only play secondary roles within VEGs or only join them involuntarily or under duress. At the same time, women's roles in committing violent acts are different from those of men. These differences are dictated by the nature and ideological background of VEGs and the characteristics of the society targeted by these groups.

Raising awareness of women's roles in violent extremism needs to take place in families, communities, governments and the private sector. This should stress that women are not mere subordinates who are forced or misled. They can be highly effective in carrying out violent acts.

Raising awareness about women's violent extremism can take place through a range of platforms and media and social activities that target women, including those who are mainly at home and less engaged in society.

The reasons and motivations behind women's adoption of extremism vary. Therefore, they cannot be addressed using one strategy. The specificities of countries and regions and their political, economic, social and cultural diversity should be considered.

Poverty and marginalization exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls to VEG abuse and violations, highlighting the need for economic and social empowerment. Education and awareness campaigns and effective communication strategies should raise public awareness of women's rights as an essential approach to P/CVE.

Stereotypes that label women as 'victims' might lead to serious gaps in security strategies. When decision-makers ignore the various causes of women's extremism in favour of a single stereotype, they will fail to eliminate violent extremism and end women's roles in it.

Priority should be given to prevention of and responses to violence against women in communities most affected by the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adopting mitigation strategies that specifically target COVID-19's economic impact on women can help build their resilience.

Strengthening women's empowerment and position within society includes laws aimed at upholding women's rights and freedoms, ensuring they can gain capacities and agency to realize well-being as productive members of society, and protecting them from gender-based violence.

Women can play proactive roles in P/CVE as influential members of their families and communities.



Livelihoods training held as part of UNDP Iraq's Community-based Reconciliation and Reintegration in Iraq Project. 2022

PART II:

WOMEN AND PREVENTING/ COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

P/CVE is part of a continuum of interventions that include countering violent extremism and terrorism. It cannot replace these approaches but recognizes that they alone cannot solve the problems at hand. In addition, P/CVE transforms discourse and practices, moving them away from negative reactions and behaviours towards more proactive steps that tackle root causes and promote peace, rights and pluralism in countering violence, violations and fanaticism.⁶⁸

Since violent extremism threatens entire societies, P/CVE should cover all levels. It should uphold the right of women and girls to participate in all strategies and programmes, building from evidence that when women are involved in peace negotiations, agreements last longer.⁶⁹ Women accounted for more than 30 percent of the negotiation team of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia for the 2016 peace agreement, the first such process with a gender subcommittee. Women also participated, in similar shares, in negotiating the 2014 peace agreement between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, helping to push for gender provisions and the inclusion of women's civil society groups. Linking women, peace and security agendas with P/CVE could increase women's opportunities to participate more freely in the public sphere. The United Nations has called for more such integration and

for increasing women's participation, leadership and empowerment in developing P/CVE strategies.⁷⁰

While one trend in prevention stresses that women's role in P/CVE should be limited to their families, as mothers, wives or sisters responsible for forming values and rejecting violence,⁷¹ women's roles should not be limited to private spheres. Women are citizens with roles in security and government institutions and in CSOs leading P/CVE efforts. Women provide new perspectives and should take part in all activities available to men, including societal and political ones, and law enforcement and other government entities. Women can be effective mediators, planners and executors of scenarios to counter violent extremism in their communities. As role models, they can have positive impacts on their personal and social environments.⁷²

Integrating women and mainstreaming gender in the design, implementation and evaluation of all P/CVE policies, laws, measures, programmes, plans and procedures makes them more comprehensive and supports women's entrance to power and leadership positions.

A gender-responsive P/CVE framework allows women different roles suitable for diverse contexts. It highlights the critical work that CSOs, especially local women-led groups, are doing to defend communities' rights and promote social

cohesion. It can draw on important parts played by women religious guides, preachers and scholars to spread a culture of tolerance and moderation and correct misconceptions.

Potential risks of involving women and girls

Women's participation in P/CVE is not without risks, up to endangering their lives.⁷³ A more public role can be met by violent reactions from extremists.⁷⁴

That said, risks also arise within P/CVE strategies that limit women's roles in prevention, such as to report family or community members who may have become radicalized. A narrow vision fails to appreciate and even undermines women's diverse social roles. Further, gender discrimination arises when women are mainly participants and not leaders of activities. Another concern is when women are confined to working on 'women's issues' instead of the general and comprehensive scope of P/CVE.

Another risk is when women and girls are used in P/CVE efforts to demonstrate adherence to gender equality and not because it is the right thing to do. This renders participation relatively shallow and can cause future problems and setbacks, including when gender equality efforts are set aside after the danger of violent extremism declines. Another issue relates to increased funding for P/CVE, which can impose its agenda on women's rights organizations struggling to find resources to work on women, peace and security.

Managing these risks requires pursuing a comprehensive, human rights-based approach to interventions, aimed at

empowerment and support for women's leadership at the grass roots and beyond so that they can help determine what is best for their communities. In this context, the Global Counterterrorism Forum⁷⁵ has suggested several core strategies:

1. Integrating women and girls and mainstreaming gender in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating all P/CVE policies, laws, programmes and practices.
2. Ensuring that P/CVE efforts respond to the involvement of women and girls in violent extremism, including by identifying gender dynamics in radicalism and extremism that lead to terrorism, and preventing this transformation in women and girls.
3. Recognizing and promoting the various roles of women and girls as key partners in P/CVE, including by developing approaches that are credible, effective and aligned with their local environment.
4. Protecting the human rights of women and girls, upholding gender equality, non-discrimination and equal opportunities, and ensuring P/CVE efforts do not stereotype women and girls.
5. Preventing and tackling the direct and indirect impacts of violent extremism and terrorism on women.
6. Engaging men and boys in mainstreaming gender and enhancing the participation of women and girls in P/CVE efforts.

7. Integrating gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation into P/CVE policies and programmes to enhance effectiveness.
8. Designing and using evidence-based approaches to identify and respond to factors leading to the involvement of women and girls in violent extremism and terrorism.
9. Ensuring that P/CVE efforts, including alternative narratives, cover the participation of women and girls in violent extremism.
10. Developing gender-sensitive disengagement, rehabilitation and mainstreaming programmes that meet the special needs of women and girls who started on the path to violent extremism or were previously involved in it.

The Global Counterterrorism Forum describes gender mainstreaming in P/CVE as improving the design and implementation of P/CVE efforts and ensuring that they consider all forms of involvement of women and girls in violent extremism. It stresses that any comprehensive approach to P/CVE should factor in different impacts of violent extremism and anti-terrorism efforts on women and girls, and men and boys. For more targeted interventions, P/CVE should consider how gender standards and expectations impact people's lives.

Integrating women and girls into all aspects of P/CVE programmes cannot happen without providing additional human rights guarantees to them. Such guarantees build on measures to reduce gender inequality and women's subordination to men. Like all human rights, the rights of women and girls should be promoted and protected

at all times and not just as a means of countering violent extremism.

International policies and directions

The international women, peace and security agenda promotes gender equality and women's rights, participation and protection, during and after conflicts. The UN Security Council first defined this agenda in resolution 1325 (2000), followed by resolutions 1889 (2009) and 2122 (2013). These tackle general subjects such as women's experiences in conflicts and their roles in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Subsequent resolutions, including 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013) and 2242 (2015), have called for more protection from violence against women during conflicts, the integration of women into decision-making on peace and security, efforts to identify how conflicts impact women, prevention of violence against women through enhancing women's rights and gender equality, and gender mainstreaming in all peace and security fields. The central idea is that conflicts impact women and girls differently. The full involvement of women in conflict prevention and resolution is therefore integral to peace and security.⁷⁶

Along with the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted in 2006, the United Nations has adopted a number of resolutions, in the Security Council and General Assembly, that highlight the importance of integrating a gender perspective and enhancing women's participation in P/CVE efforts.⁷⁷ These resolutions were supported by evidence on how women enhance the effectiveness of conflict prevention and resolution strategies and processes.

They also refer to the scope of women's roles in violent extremism, including as preventers, supporters and victims. With increasing extremism and violent extremism across the world and more political frameworks and national and international programmes targeting P/CVE, there is a growing focus on integrating gender perspectives to ensure effectiveness and sustainability, especially since women are often underrepresented in the public and government spheres, and in the security sector, particularly in leadership positions.

UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security stress the importance of aligning P/CVE efforts with those promoting women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution and rebuilding. P/CVE's relationship to women, peace and security issues⁷⁸ is highlighted in UN Security Council resolutions 2122 (2013) and 2242 (2015). Resolution 2122 stresses the UN commitment to allocate resources and ensure a focus on women, peace and security. It calls for providing women with more leadership and opportunities in these efforts.

Resolution 2242 calls for greater integration between the women, peace and security agendas and P/CVE measures, including through integrating "women's participation, leadership and empowerment" into P/CVE strategy development. It also urged "Member States and the United Nations system to ensure the participation and leadership of women and women's organizations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism... including through countering incitement to commit terrorist acts, creating counter narratives and other appropriate interventions, and building their capacity to do so effectively, and further to address, including by the empowerment

of women, youth, religious and cultural leaders, the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism." It stresses that these efforts become more effective and sustainable in the long term through women's participation and the adoption of gender perspectives to ensure a more comprehensive approach.

The resolution established a link between the women, peace and security agenda and P/CVE through women's participation, leadership and empowerment in P/CVE strategy development. It recognized the different impacts of terrorism and violent extremism on the human rights of women and girls, including on their health, education and participation in public life, and that they are often direct targets of terrorist groups. It urged Member States and UN entities to conduct and collect gender-sensitive research and data on factors driving women to adopt extremism and the implications of counterterrorism strategies for women's human rights. It also highlighted the importance of women's roles and encouraged the international community to integrate and conduct analyses of factors behind women's extremism. The resolution has led to recognition, though still limited, of the potential role of local women's organizations active in P/CVE, and interest in promoting their views, experiences and innovative work.

Resolution 2250 (2015) on youth, peace and security calls for the effective involvement of youth in global policy development. It cites the intersection of the resolution with those on women, peace and security and combating terrorism, and stresses preparing youth not only to face threats but to be partners in peace and security.

In 2015, the UN Secretary-General

issued the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in response to the Fourth Review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy⁷⁹ and UN Security Council resolution 2178 (2014). The plan recommends that: “Each Member State should consider developing a national plan of action to prevent violent extremism which sets national priorities for addressing the local drivers of violent extremism.” It also calls for supporting “the establishment of regional and global networks for civil society, youth, women’s organizations and religious leaders to enable them to share good practices and experience so as to improve work in their respective communities and promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue.”

The plan cites gender equality and women’s empowerment as crucial factors in achieving sustainable peace and stresses the need to ensure that efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism do not impact adversely on women’s rights. In line with the fifth Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality, the plan recommends that Member States mainstream gender in P/CVE efforts and integrate women in national security and law enforcement agencies, and build the capacities of women’s and civil society organizations to participate in P/CVE efforts.

Many UN resolutions and documents⁸⁰ have recognized the importance of

increasing women’s participation in P/CVE programmes. The General Assembly resolution on the Sixth Review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted in June 2018, highlighted the important role of women in P/CVE and the need to integrate gender analyses into programmes that address the drivers of extremism.

Despite international and regional resolutions, however, women still struggle amid ongoing conflicts around the world, the growing influence of VEGs and armed groups, the absence of protection mechanisms, weak law enforcement institutions, and discriminatory customs and tribal and religious traditions. Women are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence and harmful practices such as early and forced marriage, desertion, arbitrary divorce, human trafficking and deprivation of education and work. In some cases, women have become the price for resolving tribal disputes rather than active elements in conflict resolution and negotiations.⁸¹ This reality calls for decision-makers to make more efforts to counter violent extremism, eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women, and stop traditions that may abuse or exploit them, creating favourable conditions for extremism.

Women's empowerment in the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism

The UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism⁸² stressed that "In line with Security Council resolution 2242 (2015), we must ensure that the protection and empowerment of women is a central consideration of strategies devised to counter terrorism and violent extremism". In this regard, the Secretary-General recommended that Member States:

- (a) Mainstream gender perspectives across efforts to prevent violent extremism;
- (b) Invest in gender-sensitive research and data collection on women's roles in violent extremism, including on identifying the drivers that lead women to join VEGs, and on the impacts of counterterrorism strategies on their lives, in order to develop targeted and evidence-based policy and programming responses;
- (c) Include women and other underrepresented groups in national law enforcement and security agencies, including as part of counter-terrorism prevention and response frameworks;
- (d) Build the capacity of women and their civil society groups to engage in prevention and response efforts related to violent extremism; and
- (E) Ensure that a portion of all funds dedicated to addressing violent extremism is committed to projects that address women's specific needs or empower women.

Women's interventions in preventing/countering violent extremism

Women can contribute to a variety of P/CVE⁸³ efforts. They can be primary interlocutors between government institutions, including law enforcement entities, and communities, helping to identify security concerns and community needs. Several studies revealed that there is a strong connection between women's participation in the security sector, as one of the pillars of local communities, and increased effectiveness in reducing extremism and violence and preventing conflict. As active members of municipal councils, women can interact with

local law enforcement representatives and raise their awareness of gender issues. They can participate in formal or informal referral mechanisms linking practitioners and organizations to identify, assess, assist and treat people at risk of being involved in violent extremism.

Women can also become activists in CSOs or in different professions such as teachers, community leaders, psychologists, etc. Female religious guides and preachers can dissuade women from extremism and be initial communication points for women with male extremist relatives. They can provide counter-narratives, correct teachings of Islam and different perspectives on P/CVE efforts.

Some studies in Western Asia and North Africa have shown that women's views on social dynamics, ideological patterns and behavioural trends vary from those of men. Women are keen on taking part in P/CVE programmes. They have a strong interest in preventing their children from becoming terrorists and stopping the negative impacts of extremism on women and society as a whole.

The roles of mothers

A 2016 report by the UN Women and the Jordanian National Committee for Women⁸⁴ indicated that 79 percent of parents and 50 percent of students believe that mothers have great influence on their children's ideologies. Extremist groups often target women to influence their thinking and from there to influence the entire family. This also underlines women's importance in P/CVE, since they can build on their traditional social roles and positions in their families and communities.

Many women have 'soft powers' including emotional intelligence, sympathy and social influence, which are key tools in P/CVE. They observe details, and detect behavioural changes when a family or community member adopts extremism or joins an extremist group. These capacities mean P/CVE policies and programmes should focus on mothers as "essential participants in an effective security paradigm."⁸⁵

The organizations Women without Borders and Sisters against Violent Extremism adopted a programme called 'Mother Schools' to train women on P/CVE approaches. The programme is based on the idea that "mothers hold valuable data on what makes individuals vulnerable to radical influences" and

"they provide unique insights into responses that are incomprehensible to outsiders." In addition, the programme maintains that through appropriate training and capacity-building, mothers can be "strategically placed to serve as a buffer between radical influences and those targeted next."⁸⁶

While women can intervene when necessary, they often lack basic knowledge and confidence to identify and treat early signs of the radicalization of their sons and daughters. More could be done to support them to play this role. Awareness-raising efforts can include using social media and television programmes popular among women, promoting short online messages that reach women with limited mobility, distributing leaflets to women in shopping centers, organizing tailored lectures by female preachers in mosques and churches and female teachers in schools, and holding traditional workshops and lectures. Such activities should focus on monitoring children's behaviour, preventing their radicalization and encouraging them to be open to other cultures and religions by instilling the principles of moderation and tolerance.

Education and awareness-raising for others should cover the warning signs of radicalization to violence; child development, particularly how the onset of adolescence makes young people more susceptible to violent extremism; violent extremism's use of technology, particularly social media; active and fruitful community debate; and media options to discuss these topics. There should be safe channels for mothers to report early signs of radicalization, and an infrastructure of psychological, social and religious experts able to work with vulnerable youth before they adopt violent extremism.⁸⁷

Establishing sustainable links among parents, teachers, social workers/counsellors, religious leaders, police and young people brings together the diverse perspectives and experiences needed in effective prevention work. For example, social workers and religious leaders can use information they learn to help families, especially mothers, be active, informed participants in the care of their relatives, in particular, by orienting them towards specific needs, challenges and frustrations. Without such support, these efforts may be counterproductive.

Options to involve mothers

The following options can help engage mothers in P/CVE efforts. They are drawn from a wide range of regional contexts and can be adapted to suit different local and national situations.

1. Organizing social activities to raise the awareness of mothers and families about violent extremism. Such activities can discuss the ideologies of violent extremists, and their exploitation of social media and recruitment tactics.
2. Building the capacities of mothers to talk to their sons about avoiding violent extremism, such as through an easy-to-use guide. It should avoid terms such as 'countering violent extremism', which should be replaced by others such as 'spreading moderation' that do not carry a stigma
3. Training women as wives, mothers and active members of their communities to identify the signs of extremism and take steps to prevent it. Trainings should take place in safe and socially acceptable spaces, and emphasize skills such as listening, communication, empathy and persuasion. They can include woman-focused income-generating activities to support empowerment. Important secondary benefits can include women gaining the confidence to engage in P/CVE.
4. Training mothers on detecting and dismantling narratives of violent extremism, including by tackling grievances experienced by young people and exploited by violent extremists to attract and recruit young men, women and girls.

Risk analysis

When women are deemed ‘naturally prepared’ to work on preventing extremism, as agents within their homes and local communities or as key informants in early warning systems, there is a risk of gender stereotypes. This can narrow rather than expand their political agency.

While women can have an important role in preventing their children from adopting extremist ideologies and involvement in violence, their ability to play this role should not be taken for granted. Many young people who join VEGs do not inform their mothers or parents about their decision and do not heed their advice.

Insistence that women are naturally gifted in detecting what their children think and can thus stop them from engaging in violence may lead to placing the sole responsibility for prevention on mothers. When their children adopt extremism or join extremist groups anyway, mothers may be stigmatized or subject to retaliatory attacks.

Mothers involved in P/CVE may also face violent reactions from extremist men.

Civil society and women’s organizations

Government and multilateral initiatives that focus on security solutions are not sufficient to prevent violent extremism. They need to work more closely with other actors to tackle and prevent this phenomenon. CSOs are particularly important as many are rooted in local communities and run by citizens close to people’s concerns. They are trusted and can communicate around points of mutual concern. Their reach helps ensure that programmes are authentic, relevant and have the long-term commitment needed to enhance social cohesion, respect for rights and pluralism in society. Civil society actors are also indispensable bridges between the State and local communities. Many run innovative P/CVE programmes.

CSOs are often attuned to emerging issues in local communities. They have the potential to accumulate deep and long-term expertise in identifying drivers of extremism and the most effective local means to deter these, provide information and improve national strategies. Their positive role in detecting the slide from extremism into violence should not be underestimated.

In addition to their local roots, CSOs can liaise with global entities, work within and among countries, and exchange expertise and good practices. This is crucial to developing a comprehensive and effective approach to P/CVE.⁸⁸

Many women now work as civil society leaders, so efforts to engage civil society in peace processes and P/CVE may translate into bigger roles for women there. Civil society can act as the ‘back door’ for women’s efforts

when their access to political and other arenas for decision-making is limited. Women as mediators can provide scenarios to help counter all forms of violent extremism.⁸⁹

In Somalia, the Somali Women's Association helped over 1,000 youth aged 18-25 years leave the Al-Shabbab militia. Peacebuilding conferences in Somaliland, in Borama and Sanaag (1993) and Hargeisa (1996), would not have taken place without the collective lobbying of women pressuring elders to end the conflicts.

In Tunisia, feminist movements challenged the first signs of extremism after the 2011 revolution. Women were on the front lines in defending the revolution and preventing the expansion of radicalization.⁹⁰ Civil society, with many female leaders, was a primary force in resisting a change from a civil to a closed society with extremist references. Tunisian women's organizations have put combating radicalization at the centre of their philosophy and work, and consider meeting women's needs their ultimate goal. Projects by the Aswat Nissaa (Women's Voices) Organization in Tunisia feature communication with female religious figures to encourage them to spread appropriate social values.

Women's organizations also promote women's rights and integration into society as a major factor in preventing marginalization that can lead to extremism. They emphasize better education, improved economic and entrepreneurship opportunities, and gender equality in representation as among the factors reducing the risks of violent extremism. Organizations such as Aswat Nissaa,⁹¹ Tounissiat (Tunisian Women) and the Tunisian League of Women Voters host workshops and

trainings for local female leaders, encourage them to engage in public affairs and provide tools to combat threats of violence against women running for leadership positions.

Some women-led CSOs may have more access to people vulnerable to violent extremism. The UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, adopted in 2016, stressed the role of organizations of women and youth. The Security Council expressed its support and commitment to these groups in resolutions 2242 and 2250. A growing number of national P/CVE plans provide roles for CSOs, including the Tunisian National Strategy to Counter Extremism and Terrorism adopted in 2016.

Civil society and women's organizations also provide women with social media and other platforms to exchange stories on how to protect their children. This helps popularize the importance of mothers and fathers in preventing extremism.⁹² Further, civil society can communicate with former violent extremists in prisons and accompany reintegration processes. Local women-led CSOs around the world, from Indonesia to Lebanon to Nigeria, have taken part in rehabilitating and reintegrating families involved in VEGs. By bringing a gender perspective to their work, they may identify multiple entry points for engaging returnees and addressing their psychosocial, economic, ideological as well as security concerns.⁹³

Civil society dialogues are often based on containment, counselling, finding alternatives and reintegration into society. Their social and human mediation role enhances efforts to build societies based on diversity that embrace all members. The Sisters

without Borders Organization in Kenya seeks to build trust between local communities and security forces that are often viewed suspiciously. It encourages women to come up with new solutions and helps connect young men and women with employment or leadership opportunities as alternatives to violent extremism.

CSOs also work with women to raise awareness of the risks of joining VEGs and to detect the early signs of interest in extremist ideologies among children and adolescents. Global CSO networks, such as the Women and Extremism Network of the Strategic Development Institute, Women without Borders, Sisters against Violent Extremism, and Mothers for Life of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization, facilitate knowledge-sharing among women in many places affected by extremism.

Best practices on engaging CSOs

Civil society and women's organizations active in preventing violent extremism and female advocates for women's issues need the trust of government agencies and security structures to be effective. They also need technical skills and capacities to effectively tailor the content, form and outreach of messages to specific groups. Training can facilitate women's participation in the public sphere and enhance their cultural, religious and political awareness to help formulate different messages that can counter extremist scenarios. In this way, women and women's organizations could become first responders to violent extremism in their communities.

Governments should improve interactions with grass-roots, small-scale women's organizations instead

of mainly engaging with community leaders and large and well-established organizations, since the former often have more access to vulnerable groups.⁹⁴

Documenting the experiences of women's and human rights organizations is important to exchanging expertise on the national, regional and international levels. Understanding local contexts when developing interventions helps avoid generalizations and distinguish between issues in countries experiencing violent extremism, those exporting it and those affected by it.⁹⁵

Government measures to support civil society's roles in preventing violent extremism

Governments can take various steps to realize the potential of CSOs in P/CVE. They should assess and remove legal and political obstacles to CSOs providing services to local communities, as this helps in addressing the causes of violent extremism. Other elements entail ensuring they have resources, data security, and organizational and communications capabilities. These help CSOs maintain respect and credibility in local communities.

CSOs should be able to participate in regional and international conferences, workshops and training courses on P/CVE to improve knowledge, exchange expertise and benefit from multiple experiences. Capacity building and opportunities for effective, strategic and practical cooperation should involve governments, multilateral entities and civil society. Independent and credible CSOs, with a cross-section of women-led organizations, should participate in policy analysis, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of P/CVE

strategies, plans, policies, programmes and national coordination mechanisms.

Other support should help CSOs implement credible programmes to identify and tackle the drivers of violent extremism within local communities. Existing women's platforms, including for parliamentarians and networks of women's organizations, should be equipped to readily exchange knowledge and views on violent extremism and develop discussions on gender in P/CVE policies.

Facilitating CSO participation in rehabilitating and reintegrating repentant extremists and women returning from conflict zones should involve providing spaces for expression and sharing experiences. Language used in P/CVE should be free from stigmatization to avoid alienating potential CSO partners and endangering local communities and practitioners.

Risk analysis

Governments and the international community often recognize the importance of civil society. This is evident in the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and UN Security Council resolution 2242. In practice, however, legal ambiguity and a lack of coherence between policies and laws on combating extremism and terrorism in many countries leave CSOs tackling violent extremism vulnerable to multiple potential risks.

Other issues arise from CSO dependency on international financial support. This leaves them vulnerable to the political or financial influence of donor countries, which may have agendas that are not compatible with the specificities of different regions and local contexts. Partnerships with women and women's organizations may be exploited politically or to gather information about local communities and families of extremists.

Other risks stem from the lack of systematic integration of civil society in national P/CVE efforts.

Female religious guides and preachers

Religious leaders, institutions and scholars can play a major role in P/CVE given their influence especially at the grass-roots level, where community members are comfortable speaking with a "religious person from the surrounding community."⁹⁶

The Moroccan experience in training female religious guides to reduce the expansion of extremist ideologies is considered pioneering in the Islamic world. It made moderate religious fatwas accessible to a wide segment of people easily and flexibly. It eliminated the stereotype that mosques are only for men, especially for preaching and guidance, and corrected women's misconceptions and extremist ideas as well as fatwas spread by extremists.

Female religious guides and preachers are often the first point of contact for women with extremist family members seeking advice. In Egypt, Dr. Ahmad Al-Tayeb, a scholar at Al-Azhar, called on “religious scholars, instructors and professors at Al-Azhar University to raise awareness about the correct religious concepts” and confirmed his “strong” support for the role of women and willingness to “enable them to practice religious preaching”. The Egyptian Ministry of Endowments has appointed female preachers who graduated from the faculties of religious studies at Al-Azhar University to deliver religious lessons, answer questions, correct misconceptions in all jurisprudential aspects, and focus on the cultural, communications and moderate life skills promoted by Al-Azhar.

Many female religious guides and preachers provide spiritual and religious guidance to women and young people, refute contradictions presented by extremist group members, and explain religious texts that call for moderation and tolerance. Female guides and preachers may visit homes, schools, mosques and any places where extremist ideology can spread. They can be the main reason behind the return of some fighters.⁹⁷ They may be more effective than male counterparts for reasons including their greater channels of communication with women, children and young people. “It has been proven by experience that when a female preacher organizes a religious seminar in a mosque, about 450 people attend whereas when a male one organizes the same seminar, only 24 people show up.”⁹⁸

Enhancing the roles of female preachers

A first step towards bringing more female preachers into P/CVE is for ministries of endowments and Islamic affairs to realize the urgent need to build their capacities. Most depend on media to get information related to extremism. Training should focus on moderate Islamic teachings and answering women’s questions about their understanding of Islam.

Female preachers often limit their efforts to traditional ‘women’s’ issues. But they may work with women struggling to persuade their relatives to renounce violent extremism. This underscores that female preachers should contribute to a wider process of ‘spiritual security’ that aims to enhance Islamic values, including tolerance and coexistence. It should emphasize rich discussions and public debates on Islam’s humanitarian values and seek to counter extremist ideologies. This process depends in part on female preachers being able to counter extremist views and encourage other perspectives in families and local communities.

To tackle all challenges related to societies’ spiritual security, countries must invest in building religious knowledge and renewed awareness among imams and male preachers as well as female guides and preachers. All should play the role of spiritual guides within their communities, including among young men and girls. To be fully aware of what is going on inside and outside their societies, they need effective, advanced and efficient tools in various fields and should be

knowledgeable about history. They should have an understanding of trends and changes in the current moment so they remain aware of people and their problems and needs, and can help them find solutions through counselling and religious guidance.

Equipping female religious guides and preachers with oratorical, listening, communication, dispute resolution and other skills helps them engage with society. They should be able to communicate with women and girls based on a clear understanding of their environment and the issues they face. Female guides and preachers also need skills in modern digital means of communication that extremist groups use to spread their ideologies.

Raising the awareness of female religious leaders, preachers and guides should ensure that they, by interacting with women and girls, give advice and guidance to the entire family and strengthen immunity to violent extremism.

More female religious guidance staff should be in place as influential communicators to women and community figures. Establishing networks of religious leaders, social specialists, teachers and local law enforcement officials will foster an interdisciplinary approach to supporting families as part of P/CVE efforts.

Female law enforcement

Law enforcement can play an important role in P/CVE. At the same time, injustices arising from law enforcement abuses, violations by security forces and/or institutional corruption can impede the security sector's overall effectiveness in P/CVE. When some communities, especially those that are marginalized

or vulnerable, are discriminated against, stereotyped or abused by law enforcement authorities, P/CVE efforts can yield counterproductive outcomes.

Grievances from security sector violations might encourage violent extremism in different contexts. In Nigeria, former Boko Haram members expressed a desire to take revenge for the abuses committed by state security forces. Such abuses are considered a strong factor in Boko Haram's recruitment strategy.⁹⁹ Young Somali drivers who joined the Al-Shabab Movement indicated that retaliation against security forces at checkpoints was a contributing factor.¹⁰⁰ In 2009, one assessment found that brutal and degrading treatment by the police is an indirect driver of violent extremism.¹⁰¹

Other experiences suggest that when police forces have the trust of local communities, they can warn against and prevent violent extremism. Trusted policing is also critical for deepening public resilience against the messages of extremist groups, who often rail against the injustices, oppression and corruption of security actors to rally support.¹⁰² Police forces can be more effective in P/CVE than military forces¹⁰³ due to their closeness to local communities. This puts them in a better position to support a more community-focused approach¹⁰⁴ and respond to local needs, thus limiting the conditions allowing VEGs to thrive.

Women in the security field can enhance the effectiveness of police operations and trust between police and civilians. Women may have a deeper understanding of social dynamics, ideological patterns, and intellectual and cultural trends.¹⁰⁵ Strong evidence shows that their participation can effectively reduce and prevent violence.¹⁰⁶

UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security stressed the importance of women's equal participation in the security sector and urged States to increase women's representation at all levels of decision-making in preventing, managing and resolving conflicts. The resolution and practical lessons learned from its implementation provide inspiration for advocating and developing new initiatives on women in P/CVE.

Women account for about 15 per cent of police in the world today. This percentage drops dramatically in leadership positions and in many contexts where rates of violent extremism are high.¹⁰⁷ Yet women play invaluable roles, including in working with female members of VEGs. They prevent suicide bombings carried out by women, detecting the many methods women use to hide explosives.¹⁰⁸ Women are more likely to detect and deter human rights abuses, refrain from using excessive force and effectively reduce tension.¹⁰⁹ They often de-escalate violent confrontations more efficiently than their male counterparts.¹¹⁰ They can reach some marginalized populations that male counterparts cannot or find difficult to reach.

In many cases, women report some crimes and express their concerns more easily to female police officers.¹¹¹ Survivors of sexual abuse and domestic violence in particular are more likely to report these crimes to female police officers. In some contexts, only women are allowed to respond and provide care to female victims of terrorist attacks.¹¹² Both male and female police forces need to understand gender dynamics and the different experiences of men and women, and how these may influence practices such as reporting crimes.

The Joint Task Force in Nigeria consists of 25,000-36,000 personnel including men and women.¹¹³ It currently acts as a quasi-military governmental force, much like the Sons of Iraq. With its knowledge of the local terrain and language and intelligence gathering skills, it has greatly contributed to successful insurgency countering efforts in Nigeria.¹¹⁴ The Joint Task Force was the first body to integrate women into counterinsurgency operations; it currently contains 50-100 female members. Their responsibilities include inspecting women in churches, mosques and other public places, gathering intelligence and arresting suspected insurgents. Female members have managed to prevent a number of attacks by Boko Haram.

An analysis of women in P/CVE efforts in Nigeria found that women police officers can carry out physical inspections of women and girls at checkpoints using culturally appropriate methods. The policewomen are also able to gather various information about security threats because they reach places that men were not allowed to enter.¹¹⁵ This became particularly important after women members of VEGs started to carry out repeated violent attacks.

Women and the prevention of violent extremism on social media

Social media have been an exceptional incubator for extremism in recent years. VEGs have used them for feeding young people radical ideas to recruit them, and spreading violent propaganda to isolate young people and link them to a new society created by a violent ideology. VEGs have waged psychological warfare on adversaries through showing power represented by crowds of heavily armed young men

and women, and children expressing their allegiance to them. They also send subliminal messages to sympathizers, collaborators and individual extremists through social media to encourage them to carry out individual attacks using their own resources.

The Internet facilitates widespread radicalization and violent extremism.¹¹⁶ Social networks can also open access to content for women and young people. It eases communication among like-minded people and drives extremist and violent behaviour.

Women and young people in the pre-extremism stage are often searching for something and feel that they are at a crossroads. Psychological mechanisms such as insecurity, a sense of injustice and a desire for social inclusion lead young people and women to agree with other people who express similar views.

Extremist groups use social media innovatively. Diverse discourses suit the specificities of each targeted population. In many cases, these discourses are dominated by an emotional tone, grievances and demonization of the 'enemy' and are accepted by a large number of sympathizers with a given cause. Groups target women and young people with three inducements: answering their existential questions and thus giving meaning to their existence, responding to their sense of injustice and giving them a sense of belonging.

Since extremist groups use social media to spread their extremist ideas and attract their members, there is an urgent need for refuting these discourses on social media and publishing counter-narratives. Women should be engaged in developing credible counter-narratives that expose deceitful recruitment messages giving

false hope and stirring hatred to justify violence.

One starting point is to ensure that women can develop media and information literacy to create and disseminate counter-narratives. They need to be able to verify data and apply analytical skills to critically evaluate information and media content from different sources. They also need to be able to create their own content or respond to extremist content using information and communication technology in line with human rights principles, a spirit of tolerance and a culture of peace.

Effective counter-narratives are adapted to targeted groups, including women and young people. They employ an appropriate language and use social media creatively. Since many CSOs have deep links with local communities, improving their capabilities and enhancing their presence on social media can advance effective and sustainable responses. It is also important to protect the accounts of activists who combat extremism, prevent hackers from taking over these accounts, ensure the confidentiality of people's data, and, when necessary, pass violations on to government agencies through appropriate channels.

Alternative platforms are needed to promote democratic practices and new discourses based on the culture of human rights, towards enhancing the values and principles of citizenship, coexistence, moderation and tolerance. Programmes, apps, games and videos can all communicate messages that encourage the culture of peace, cultural diversity and respect for others. Youth, women and children should be involved in all stages of planning and preparing these to achieve positive responses.

The following table summarizes key elements of media and information literacy.

Summary of components, subjects and competencies of media and information literacy¹¹⁷		
Components	Subjects	Competencies
		A media and information literate person can
Recognizing the demand for and being able to search for, access and retrieve information and media content	Definition and articulation of the need for information	Determine and articulate the nature, role and scope of information and media (content) through using a variety of resources
	Search and location of information and media content	Search and locate information and media content
	Access to information, media content, and media and information providers	Access needed information and media content as well as media and information providers effectively, efficiently and ethically
	Retrieval and holding/storage and retention of information and media content	Retrieve and temporarily hold information and media content using a variety of methods and tools
Understanding, assessment and evaluation of information and media content	Understanding of information and media	Understand the necessity of media and information providers in society
	Assessment of information, media content, media and information providers	Assess, analyse, compare, articulate and apply initial criteria for assessment of retrieved information and its sources, as well as evaluate media and information providers
	Evaluation of information, media content, media and information providers	Evaluate and authenticate information and media content and its sources and media and information providers
	Organization of information and media content	Synthesize and organize information and media content

 continue



Summary of components, subjects and competencies of media and information literacy ¹¹⁷		
Components	Subjects	Competencies
		A media and information literate person can
Creating, using and monitoring information and media content	Creation of knowledge and creative expression	Create and produce new information, media content or knowledge for a specific purpose in an innovative, creative and ethical manner
	Communication of information, media content and knowledge in an ethical and effective manner	Communicate information, media content and knowledge in an ethical, legal and effective manner using appropriate channels and tools
	Participating in societal/public activities as active citizens	Engage with media and information providers for self-expression, intercultural dialogue and democratic participation through various means in an ethical, effective and efficient manner
	Monitoring the influence of information and media content and knowledge production and use as well as media and information providers	Monitor the impact of created and distributed information, media content and knowledge as well as use existing media and other media providers

Women's public roles in preventing violent extremism

Women prevent extremism on the ground as teachers, human rights activists and leaders within their communities. They work courageously to advance moderate thinking, respect for human rights and gender equality. As leaders and activists, they promote and participate in discourses about

their rights and how these are affected by extremist cultural and religious practices that harm women in their local communities.

Supporting women so that they can prevent violent extremism and help other women fight for justice, dignity and human rights should be part of comprehensive strategies to counter violent extremism and promote values that protect the fundamental rights of all people.¹¹⁸ Effective P/CVE tools centre

on eliminating gender discrimination and ensuring women's equal roles in decision-making.

Mainstreaming gender dimensions in strategies for combating extremism and terrorism can effectively contribute to P/CVE. In Lebanon, the National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism, adopted in 2018, was based on a clear understanding of the gender nature of violent extremism. One of the strategy's pillars was gender equality and women's empowerment. It sought to raise women's awareness of their constitutional and legal rights and the risks of violent extremism at the individual and family levels; pursue legislative reforms to achieve justice and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women; foster women's participation in social, cultural and development activities; and advance women's participation in decision and policymaking processes.

Women also spread a culture of tolerance, coexistence and love through culture and art. Theater, cinema, drawing, photography, sculpture and so on can present principles of equality and highlight women's positive roles in society. Uniting people around cherishing the value of life can combat the culture of extremism and death.¹¹⁹

In involving women in culture and art as part of P/CVE, laws may be needed to protect women's freedom and guarantee their full civil rights, including to unleash their creative capacities, to enjoy their intellectual rights and social status, and to be protected from discriminatory tribal customs and norms.

Women's clubs, associations and cultural centres can help shift notions of women's roles and highlight how they are vital in developing society. Educational curricula should stress respect for women's rights

and capabilities in developing their countries and achieving prosperity. Complementary efforts should build a civil society based on citizenship, human rights, non-discrimination and social justice.

Lessons learned from integrating gender into programmes to prevent violent extremism

Despite increased awareness of the gender dimensions of violent extremism and the importance of involving women in P/CVE efforts, these remain mostly patriarchal. Programmes cling to outdated notions of masculinity and femininity, where women are assumed to be 'moderate' by nature. This results in overlooking women and granting them only limited roles, which in turn undercuts the opportunity to fully understand the gender dimensions of violent extremism. Consequently, P/CVE policies and efforts fail while reinforcing women's insecurity.

UN Security Council resolution 2242 calls on women to play a leading role in developing P/CVE strategies. But women are still significantly underrepresented in relevant international institutions, national decision-making and national P/CVE agencies. This limits their ability to effectively influence relevant definitions, strategies and approaches. Further, there is awareness of the urgent need to expand P/CVE efforts at the national, regional and international levels, as a 'more lenient' approach in tackling the reasons motivating women and young people to join terrorist or violent extremist groups. But the hard power¹²⁰ or security and military measures taken by national and international actors to counter these groups remains dominant.

Violence arising from these responses undermines sustainable peace and gender equality, and renders women and girls vulnerable to increasing insecurity.

Women participating in P/CVE activities and programmes, particularly in local women's organizations, are often valued for their personal commitment rather than their political achievements. Their primary role is seen as coming from being mothers instead of leaders, and they are often exploited in ways that emphasize rather than challenges rigid gender perspectives. This is the norm rather than an exception. Instead of adding to women's expertise in P/CVE, the international community continues to view women's role in a very simplistic and superficial way.

In recent years, the gender dimensions of violent extremism have started to receive growing attention. This includes greater interest in diagnosing the causes of women's extremism and the fact that women's complex roles may involve supporting or encouraging violent extremism. There is awareness of women's direct involvement, especially as female suicide bombers.

There is also more attention to protecting women and girls from all forms of abuse, including through comprehensive responses linking legal, medical and psychological support. Zero tolerance for sexual and gender-based violence and strict penalties against perpetrators of sexual violence and violence against women and girls combat impunity and promote justice, and in turn reduce grievances within society.

Growing support for the role of women in P/CVE includes working with local grass-roots women's organizations and funding gender-sensitive P/CVE programmes. While women in P/CVE

efforts have the dual role of overcoming the daily difficulties of fragile contexts and breaking down gender barriers, many have successfully challenged such obstacles. Creative and innovative programmes from around the world demonstrate women's leadership capacities in security and P/CVE and illuminate capabilities that have long been overlooked.

The success of women-led programmes also highlights the importance of engaging them in addressing root causes of violent extremism at all levels of prevention initiatives. Such programmes typically stress the importance of developing critical thinking and social empowerment, and trusting women. Since most programmes launched by women rely on outside assistance, the international community and donors should focus on building their capacities to make P/CVE efforts effective, sustainable and responsive to local needs.

At the local and national levels, women often bear the brunt of violence by extremist groups and may also feel pressured to take sides with or against certain groups. Any external support for women to aid in identifying signs of extremism within their communities needs to carefully define the risks and vulnerabilities they face. Conflict prevention and peacebuilding more broadly should ensure social inclusion and women's effective participation at all levels. Respecting and promoting women's rights are crucial.

National, regional and international actors need to prioritize building sustainable peace through addressing the structural drivers of violent extremism, including gender inequality. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the women, peace and security agenda feature strong commitments to

conflict prevention, gender equality and women's empowerment. Transforming these frameworks into practical strategies, projects and programmes will contribute to building more just and peaceful societies that guarantee equal opportunities for men and women and address the grievances used by violent groups to attract new members.

There is a need to effectively integrate gender analysis into national and regional P/CVE efforts. Likewise, gender perspectives should be mainstreamed into all national policies and programmes and women's effective participation in decision-making promoted.

Women's participation in the security sector enhances effectiveness in curbing violent extremism and preventing conflict. Women understand social dynamics, ideological patterns and behavioural trends in ways that may differ from those of men. To tap their skills requires increasing the number of women in the security sector along with making structural and cultural changes in police forces. Women should hold leadership positions where they can influence P/CVE strategies and initiatives and contribute different and important views to enhance effectiveness. Women leaders in government institutions responsible for P/CVE who are trained on gender issues can help shape more comprehensive approaches, including to address the gender drivers of violent extremism.¹²¹

Integrating gender perspectives into security sector policies and programmes can help prevent and reduce civil grievances, including by providing all police officers with appropriate knowledge and skills to assess the roles of men, women, boys and girls, and respond to their different needs. A large number of local and international CSOs have experience in supporting

the security sector through providing community awareness training and other prevention work.¹²² Engaging CSOs in law enforcement training on violent extremism can help police gain perspectives on threats to particular groups and measures to combat them. CSO involvement can also increase the security sector's credibility in the eyes of the population.¹²³

The justice sector also needs to understand the gender dimensions of violent extremism. In some cases, traditional gender biases dominate judicial proceedings and lead to less severe penalties for female offenders.¹²⁴ Defense attorneys and news commentators "regularly cast female terrorism offenders as naïve, gullible, susceptible targets of violent extremism, even when they admit their culpability by pleading guilty."

From a broader perspective, achieving and sustaining security and preventing violent extremism require a range of social investments, such as improving living standards, guaranteeing jobs for women and youth, encouraging community work and providing effective and decentralized health services. Without such investment, gender equality will not advance and the role of women in P/CVE will fall short and may even entail exploitation.¹²⁵

Progress on P/CVE over the long term will require consistent political and historical awareness and continuous evaluation. It calls for identifying the position of individuals inside society and challenging the many relationships of power and authority that they, consciously or unconsciously, inherit.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Women play roles in P/CVE in families and as workers, decision-makers and influencers of public opinion.

More financial resources should be allocated to enhance women's participation in all dimensions of P/CVE programmes and policies.

Empowering women as leaders and recognizing them as actors in P/CVE can reduce risks of extremism for women and societies at large.

Providing awareness activities and materials in places frequented by women, such as shopping centres, mosques, churches and schools, can encourage them to monitor changes in the behaviour of their children.

Building women's capacities and raising their awareness of different signs of emerging extremism in their children and their social environment can support efforts to intervene in a timely manner. Women may be the first to sound the alarm in a family.

Parents should be included in interventions to encourage their children to be open to other cultures and religions.

Spotlighting positive examples of women as role models and supporting moderate religious guides and preachers can shift harmful stereotypes of women.

Female religious guides and preachers can be valuable resources with the right capacities. They can maintain trust in spreading moderate Islam and answering women's questions. There may be opportunities for connecting female preachers and women leaders.

Civil society and women's organizations should be encouraged and supported to foil the attempts of extremist groups to recruit women, including through initiatives to build women's skills and develop other avenues of empowerment.

Cultivating trust and maintaining good relationships with local leaders and tribal chiefs may foster support for and protection of women's P/CVE efforts on the local level, or at least prevent violent reactions against it.

More efforts are needed to enhance women's representation in the security sector. Female security personnel and women CSO leaders have been effective in countering the recruitment of women in extremist groups.

Building the capacities of criminal justice institutions to mainstream gender in countering terrorism crimes is an essential component of P/CVE operations. This enables a more effective approach to investigating these crimes, prosecuting and detaining perpetrators, and ensuring victims gain access to justice.¹²⁶

Highlighting successful experiences in which women make substantial contributions to curbing violent extremism can generate greater acceptance and support for their efforts.

Countries should adopt national action plans to implement UN Security Council resolution 1325 and integrate the women, peace and security agenda into national P/CVE measures.

Women should not only be targeted by P/CVE policies but actively engaged in designing and implementing them.



A perceived-ISIL affiliated family from Ninewa, Iraq. 2021.

IRAQI CONTEXT

Iraqi Women and Violent Extremism

Some Iraqi sociologists say Iraq's 'conflict culture' stems from the existence of two systems of values, namely, Bedouin values and urban values. This leads to a duality where violence is used to deal with others.¹²⁷ Other experts believe that the Iraqi character is locked inside many family, tribal, local and racial shells that become partisan and political and are characterized by isolationism and intolerance of others.¹²⁸

Bedouin and rural values focus on the reputation of families and tribes. As this focus moves to cities and continues in paternal families, women become fuel for conflicts or part of the price paid to quench them. In tribal conflicts, women bear the war flags and incite fighters. Even in conflicts against other countries, the war agenda includes preserving the dignity and honour of women and inciting them to reproduce and serve fighters.¹²⁹

This analysis considers the status of women in Iraq in light of customs and traditions and their different roles in peace and war. Iraqi women are, at the same time, key actors in and victims of violence and conflicts.

Before the 1980s, women achieved significant strides towards gender equality, including more opportunities in education, health care and jobs, and increased participation in politics. After the first Gulf War in 1991 and the subsequent UN sanctions on Iraq, these gains dwindled. Conditions worsened during consecutive conflicts, including the occupation of the United States of America in 2003, the sectarian violence

that reached its peak in 2006 and 2007, and ISIS occupation in 2014. Although the status of Iraqi women has improved since then, there are still many structural, cultural, economic and security barriers to building an inclusive society based on gender equality.¹³⁰

Potential circumstances that may lead Iraqi women to adopt violent extremism

The reasons Iraqi women adopt violent extremism are similar to those described throughout this broader report. Iraq has not been free of violence and instability for three decades. In that context, women struggle with marginalization, illiteracy, unemployment and poverty. For example, the percentage of literate women dropped from 90 percent in the 1950s to 50 percent. Iraqi women's participation in the labour market is below 15 percent,¹³¹ and the percentage of girls who complete their elementary education is 50 percent compared with 75 percent of boys. Among children aged 13 years old, 80 percent of boys go to school regularly compared with 40 percent of girls.¹³²

Women face barriers that prevent them from entering the labour market or make them withdraw from it. These include legal constraints, limiting social customs and traditions, discrimination by employers, harassment in the workplace and restrictions on movement. One in every five Iraqi women is physically harassed.¹³³

Many women face sectarian and gender-related threats. Displaced women from racial and religious minorities are often more vulnerable. On the national level,

women occupying senior positions in media, politics and business confront discrimination in the workplace as well as threats of killing and assassination. Some Iraqi human rights experts describe vicious campaigns that target women. Women also reportedly experience harassment and violations by police officers and judicial personnel.¹³⁴

Iraqi women have always been vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse and harmful practices such as child marriage, temporary marriage, trafficking, so-called 'honor crimes' and tribal settlements. Some families in the central and southern provinces force their daughters into early marriage to reduce family expenses, claiming that this provides them with security and stability. These practices have worsened; the age of marriage in some areas is as low as 10 years.¹³⁵

A study carried out by the Iraqi Ministry of Planning in 2012 showed that at least 36 percent of married women reported, during times of peace, being subjected to some form of psychological abuse by their husbands. Sexual and gender-based violence rates tend to increase during wars, terrorism and displacement.

Very few incidents of violence against women and girls are reported despite gradual political and legislative changes and new standard operating procedures to respond to cases. Violence is often legitimized by perpetrators, families and the wider society. Most women have concerns about stigma and blame, and accusations by their families and the broader society. Some victims are killed by a family member on the pretext of 'honour'. Among the very few women reporting crimes, the majority do not file cases against perpetrators.

The Ministry of Interior's Directorate of Family and Child Protection from Domestic Violence has adopted a

24/7 reporting mechanism for abused women to register complaints. The mechanism also receives information from hospitals, schools and other government entities on domestic violence cases. Staff interview abused women and perpetrators and refer victims for medical examinations.¹³⁶

Participation of women in violent extremism and terrorism

Due to established tribal customs and traditions, continuing weaknesses of law enforcement institutions and the absence of protection mechanisms, women are increasingly vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, domestic and societal violence and the deprivation of essential rights such as education, health and work. In addition, rife corruption, poor governance system, growing grievances and feelings of exclusion and marginalization have fuelled radicalization and extremism. This has made women double targets for extremists who either recruit them and exploit their support, since social, economic and political conditions have made them 'easy prey', or target and enslave them and impose brutal laws and penalties on them.¹³⁷

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq, used women to carry out suicide and terrorist bombings due to the lack of male volunteers and to garner wider media coverage. The appearance of women in military camps has been treated as 'thrilling' news, attracting an audience used to seeing women in stereotypical roles.¹³⁸ After occupying one third of Iraq's territories in 2014, ISIS recruited many women to serve as fighters and provide logistical and fighting support in occupied regions. The group also committed

horrific crimes of genocide and ethnic and religious cleansing where women were the first victims.

There are no accurate figures on how many Iraqi women are involved in violent extremism and terrorism. Few data and studies exist on the gender dimensions of violent extremism in Iraq. However, the support ISIS received in occupied areas and the involvement of women in assisting ISIS members, whether willingly or unwillingly, represent a warning to better assess and analyse women in violent extremism. Findings should be applied in developing strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism, and in mainstreaming gender across rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

In general, some women who have experienced different psychological traumas see joining terrorist groups as a means to restore capacities that society has taken away. This is especially the case for those who grew up in extremist environments and societies that constrain their rights and subject them to exclusion and gender-based violence. Some respond to the social traditions and pressures restricting their rights by promoting extremist ideas that sanctify self-sacrifice. Where women lack alternative ways to express their anger, it may transform into deep-seated hatred that provides fertile soil for extremist ideas.¹³⁹

Iraqi women as victims of violent extremism

In terrorism and violent extremism in Iraq, women are not only followers or supporters but also victims who endure horrific kinds of enslavement. After 9 June 2014, areas occupied by ISIS witnessed formidable waves

of displacement. Between January 2014 and 26 May 2016, there were 3,306,822 internally displaced people,¹⁴⁰ most of them women and children. ISIS committed genocide, ethnic and religious cleansing crimes against women and girls that can amount to genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' report in March 2015. Mass murders were carried out at the Camp Speicher¹⁴¹ massacre and in Anbar, Hawija, Saqlawia and other locations.¹⁴²

In ISIS-controlled territories, Yazidi, Turkmen, Christian and Shabak women and girls faced systematic brutality including killings, abductions, the selling of female captives, forced changes in religion¹⁴³ and rape and other forms of sexual violence.¹⁴⁴ The fate of thousands of them is still unknown.¹⁴⁵ As of June 2018, around 6,417 Yazidis had been abducted, including 3,548 women, of whom 3,300 were released. The Kurdistan Regional Government registered 250 abductions of Christians in the Nineveh Plains as of April 2017.¹⁴⁶

Among Yazidi female captives, 950 managed to run away. They suffered psychological damages that led many to commit suicide after violations including rape, sexual abuse, forced marriage, subsequent pregnancies and miscarriages, and the negative impacts on their health.¹⁴⁷ Around 400 women, including doctors, teachers, lawyers and journalists, were tortured and sentenced to death for disobeying ISIS orders and abstaining from practicing the sexual jihad.¹⁴⁸

ISIS imposed strict restrictions on the dress code of women and girls and their movement and isolated them from their families, friends and public life through the so-called 'Diwan Al-Hisba'.

Summary

In some cases, tribal conflicts deliberately target women to defeat other groups. This targeting is often accompanied by sectarianism, tribalism and terrorism. Iraqi women already struggle with discrimination, exclusion and gender-based violence. They suffer deeply as they and their children, husbands and families pay the costs of wars and armed conflicts. In many cases, due to the tribal system, violence and conflict, women do not go to schools or drop out early, which increases their vulnerability. Many have been exploited to carry out suicide bombings where vulnerability becomes the tool of violence rather than its target.

Women can be part of violence and fall victim to it at the same time, as female suicide bombers demonstrate. The loss of relatives, abject poverty, illiteracy, depression, hopelessness, outrage, brainwashing and coercion can lead women to adopt violent extremism, carry out suicide attacks and join terrorist groups. After 2006, many young girls were forced to marry Al-Qaeda leaders and join armed groups that recruited them as suicide bombers. Some data indicate that Iraqi female suicide bombers carried out 25 attacks in 18 months.¹⁴⁹ ISIS targeted women widely and employed them in different and diverse roles.

Despite the military defeat of ISIS, the situation of Iraqi women remains complicated due to the expanding control of armed militias and because security and judicial authorities are not handling grave violations against women adequately. This creates an enabling environment for violent extremism to resurface. Extremely bleak scenarios for women include the fact that more than 1.2 million have been displaced since 2014.¹⁵⁰

Iraqi Women and Preventing/countering violent extremism

Iraqi society is multicultural. The freedom of women thus depends on the customs and traditions of each governorate. Some governorates operate under the tribal system and deprive women of their freedom. Others are more open. Some are governed by customs that impose certain red lines and constraints on women. The war on ISIS, however, established a new pattern of women resisting and countering terrorism. Many women-led initiatives were implemented to combat ISIS and contribute to reconstruction after it was expelled from its strongholds.

Participation in the war against ISIS

The participation of Iraqi women in the liberation war against ISIS took many forms. For example, some Yazidi women followed the model of the Kurdish female soldiers in the Popular Defense Forces in Syria who fought ISIS. The Yazidi women formed their own militia, the Women Protection Unit in Shigal (another name for Sinjar). Yazidi women who escaped sexual enslavement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq also formed their own battalion. Scores of Kurdish female fighters fought ISIS, despite its brutal image. The existential fear might have been bigger than ISIS and its terrorism.

Members of the Mosul's Women's Force confronted ISIS on the front lines. They sought to counter terrorism and highlight the roles of women under ISIS and in displacement camps. Some

women managed, even under ISIS control, to deliver aid, food supplies and medicines not only to displaced women but to all those who managed to flee ISIS's brutality and make it to safety. Others checked on displaced women and those who fled ISIS to the camps near Nineveh. The Mosul's Women's Force has also drawn attention to the importance of setting goals for women to advance and participate in political, social and cultural arenas in the era after ISIS.

To enhance women's participation in law enforcement and in Preventing/countering violent extremism, the Iraqi State has worked over the last few years to increase women's representation in the Ministry of Interior. In 2006, the number of women totalled 10,049:¹⁵¹ 273 officers, 853 commissioners, 6,352 ranking officers, 44 students, 2,516 civil employees and 11 employees on contracts.¹⁵²

Participation in reconstruction

After ISIS was expelled from its last strongholds, Iraqi women saw reconstruction as a good opportunity to assume leadership roles. They demonstrated determination and courage as they returned to their destroyed communities and began restoring and rebuilding infrastructure, and operating services. Many demonstrated their capabilities in working alongside male professional colleagues in arenas that were until recently male preserves.¹⁵³

A number of young Iraqi women took part in an afforestation campaign in Sadiyah and Jalawla in eastern Diyala. The project focused on building morale and reviving the spirit of volunteerism and participation in societal affairs.

Participation in peacebuilding

After 2003, women played limited but effective roles in peacebuilding. They testified, including some who were illiterate, at the Supreme Criminal Court against perpetrators of genocides and war crimes, despite threats to their lives. Thousands of women submitted applications to find their husbands, brothers and children disappeared by the former regime and filed request to punish perpetrators.

Women mobilized in many demonstrations against the occupation and violence, and to demand certain rights. They participated in parliamentary and governorate council elections and the constitutional referendum, and joined political parties and movements. They continued to work in civil society, including to monitor government work and to reveal cases of violence against women and identify those responsible for them.

In April 2014, the Council of Ministers adopted the National Strategy for the Advancement of the Status of Iraqi Women. It included the National Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security. Iraq became the first country in the Middle East and North Africa to develop a national plan to implement this resolution according to the statements of the UN envoy in Iraq at the time. The plan consisted of six pillars: participation, protection, prevention, promoting decisions, resource mobilization, and monitoring and evaluation. Many CSOs, including the Alliance for the National Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325, participated in developing it.

Two months after the plan was adopted, ISIS invaded Iraq, controlled many territories and committed horrible crimes, oil prices fell, and the country faced a host of security and economic challenges. In response to security developments, the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs, in consultation with CSOs, submitted an emergency plan that the Council of Ministers approved in May 2015. It consisted of three pillars: participation, protection and prevention. It aimed to meet displaced women's basic needs and respond to cases of female abductees, many of whom were abused by ISIS.

Following the military defeat of ISIS, and in light of the evidence on how women were affected and their contributions to peacebuilding, social cohesion and development, women and women's organizations worked with the Government to implement the National Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 and actively involve women in achieving security and peace. In 2019, the Supreme Council of Women was established to implement a variety of actions, including those related to Iraq's commitments under resolution 1325.¹⁵⁴

There is increasing emphasis on solidarity and joint work between State institutions and CSOs to build a society free of violence, terrorism and extremism. This process draws on the dialogue and engagement of all people in enhancing peaceful coexistence and broad societal reconciliation. There are calls to double efforts to forge partnerships based on joint work between state institutions and CSOs, given the importance of women's roles and the need to involve them in decision-making in peacebuilding and

inclusive, meaningful reconciliation. One point of emphasis is to review policies and laws and implement those guaranteeing women's rights.

With the support of UNDP in Iraq, eight women's peace teams were formed in Saladin, Kirkuk, Sinjar, Tal Afar, Anbar, Diyala, Ninewa and Ninevah Plains to enhance social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in their communities. These teams support local peace committees in implementing various community initiatives.

Iraqi women have created a radio station, Love Radio, which focuses on women's issues and problems. From basic UN-supported studios, female

staff broadcast for eight hours every day. Diverse programmes cover family and parenting issues as well as violence against women and the ambitions of young women today. The project's aim is to "convey a message to Iraqi women that they are the basis for building Iraq and encourage them to assume their real role in society and combat all attempts to marginalize them."¹⁵⁵

Many Iraqi media professionals more generally have sought to spread a culture of tolerance, dialogue and acceptance. They have highlighted the suffering of displaced women, and stressed social cohesion and civil peace, goals that cannot be achieved without Iraqi women.

Summary

Iraqi women have advanced peacebuilding and social cohesion during and after conflicts. But they urgently need more government support. Laws should more systematically uphold their freedoms and rights. Women's greater engagement in politics is imperative for national reconciliation as women can be key in driving social changes.

In a conflict-affected country like Iraq, there are many local women's peace initiatives, mostly in affected areas. It is extremely important to reach, support and consult with these local efforts to end hostilities and enhance dialogue and understanding under resolution 1325.

Iraqi women can also contribute fundamentally to Preventing/countering violent extremism but they need opportunities to develop capacities and leadership skills, and economic and political empowerment. Their roles run from early warnings about extremist behaviour in families and communities, to shaping disengagement, rehabilitation and integration programmes, to advocating fairer and more equal laws in Parliament.

Quality education and decent job opportunities, preventing gender-based violence, providing protection mechanisms, and in general ending conditions that can make women feel desperate, vindictive and oppressed are all ways to reduce the likelihood that women will join or support violent extremist groups.

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BETWEEN PERPETRATION AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM ACCOUNTING FOR GENDER



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